

*Come,  
Lord Jesus*



# *Come, Lord Jesus*

TIMELESS HOMILIES FOR  
ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

Bishop Robert Barron

WORD  on FIRE.

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*THE FIRST  
WEEK of ADVENT*

“Stay awake! For you do not know on  
which day your Lord will come.”

—MATTHEW 24:42





# *WE NEED A SAVIOR*

Isaiah 63:16b–17, 19b; 64:2–7 (Year B)

You, LORD, are our father,  
our redeemer you are named forever.  
Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways,  
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?  
Return for the sake of your servants,  
the tribes of your heritage.  
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come  
down,  
with the mountains quaking before you,  
While you wrought awesome deeds we could not  
hope for,  
such as they had not heard of from of old.  
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but  
you  
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.  
Would that you might meet us doing right,  
that we were mindful of you in our ways!  
Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;  
all of us have become like unclean people,  
all our good deeds are like polluted rags;  
We have all withered like leaves,  
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.  
There is none who calls upon your name,  
who rouses himself to cling to you;  
For you have hidden your face from us

and have delivered us up to our guilt.  
Yet, O LORD, you are our father;  
we are the clay and you the potter:  
we are all the work of your hands.

And so we begin the Advent season, the time of waiting and watching. Here is the single biggest challenge of this season: really to feel our need for a savior! We tend to domesticate Christ, reducing him to a guru, a teacher, a spiritual guide, a wise philosopher. But that does violence to the Gospel, which presents him not simply as teacher but as Savior. Jesus has rescued us, saved us, done something that we could never, even in principle, do for ourselves. Until we truly feel what it means to be lost and helpless, we will not appreciate who Jesus is and what he means.

It's helpful here to reflect on the meaning of the word *redemption*. *Redimere* means to “buy back” in Latin. It's a term that was used to describe the process of the release of a person who was kidnapped. Someone is held for ransom, and once the ransom is paid, he has been “redeemed.” If you are kidnapped, you are held captive; there is not much you can do except wait for someone to save you. “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel”: let the meaning of that single line from the most famous Advent hymn sink into your heart. Only then

will you truly understand the meaning of this season. It's as though we are prisoners: we can't save ourselves, so we wait and we watch.

In many ways, the culture, which steadily teaches the ideology of self-esteem and self-assertion, militates against Christianity at this point, saying, "I'm okay and you're okay" or "Who are you to tell me how to behave?" But this sort of thing—whatever value it might have politically or psychologically—is simply inimical to a biblical Christianity. The biblical view is that we have, through the abuse of our freedom, gotten ourselves into an impossible bind. Sin has compromised us in such a fundamental way that we become, spiritually speaking, dysfunctional.

We are made for love and connection and justice and nonviolence, but at every turn and in every way, we are twisted in the direction of hatred, separation, injustice, and violence. We are, as St. Augustine put it, wandering in the land of dissimilitude and in the grip of the *libido dominandi* (lust for domination). The contemporary philosopher René Girard has reminded us that all of our social arrangements are marked by scapegoating and oppression. If we doubt any of this, I would recommend a careful viewing of the news any night of the week.

Is this just pessimism? No—it is spiritual realism. We can make progress in politics and education and science and culture, accomplishing wonderful things and improving the lives of many, but we can't shake the effects of sin. We can't solve our problem through an act of the will, for the very compromising

and perversion of the will is our problem. It's like someone who is stuck in quicksand: the more you struggle to get out of it, the more you sink into it.

Listen now to the language of the prophet Isaiah, the keynote address for the Advent season: "Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful." St. John Henry Newman said that natural religion wears its dark face outward. The primordial religious experience is this sense of the anger of God. Why? Because we are sinners. So when God comes close, we experience God as angry with us. Now, we should not emotionalize this language, as though God is falling into a snit. The "anger" of God is a way of conceptualizing this experience of alienation from him.

Isaiah continues: "All of us have become like unclean people, / all our good deeds are like polluted rags; / we have all withered like leaves, / and our guilt carries us away like the wind." Notice that Isaiah refers to *good* deeds. He doesn't deny that we can do good things, but he insists that even these are "polluted rags"—which is to say, still tainted by our fundamental dysfunction.

Our language of addiction can help us to understand this truth. When someone finds himself in the grip of an addiction, he is out of control, voiceless. And there is nothing he can do to lift himself out of the problem. This is why, in the twelve-step programs, a person, having hit bottom, must turn his life over to a higher power. He has to surrender to a force beyond his own will, for his own will is the problem. This surrender carries over into his commitment to a group and a sponsor. And

this process is usually prompted by some sort of intervention, whereby a group of friends and colleagues breaks through the person's defenses and convinces him that he "needs help."

Furthermore, we know how addictions and other dysfunctions can affect an entire family system. There is a group called Adult Children of Alcoholics, for example, because we realize that people are permanently and deeply affected by the dysfunction of a key family member. A child growing up in a family marked by physical abuse or sexual abuse or substance abuse is permanently marked by the experience. Such a family needs an outside intervention in order to cure it. No one from within the group can solve the problem of the group.

The human race is best characterized as a dysfunctional spiritual family, all of us having been marked from birth by the effects of sin. Sin has found its way into every aspect of human life—personally, societally, and institutionally. We would be hopelessly naïve to think otherwise. And so we need not just a philosopher or social theorist or political activist or military hero; we need a savior, someone who can break into our dysfunction from the outside and heal us.

In light of this discussion, look at the beautiful image with which our Isaiah passage ends: "O LORD, you are our father; / we are the clay and you the potter: / we are all the work of your hands." What we need is the intervention of a loving God who will shape us anew. We can't do it ourselves; we need a savior. When you feel that in your bones, you are ready for Advent.

# LOOK TO THE SON OF MAN

Luke 21:25–28, 34–36 (Year C)

Jesus said to his disciples: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.

“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”

What an extraordinary commencement to the new liturgical year! We are, as it were, slapped in the face with Luke’s version of Jesus’ apocalyptic speech concerning the end of all things.

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay. . . . People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” This is a kind of unraveling of Genesis. In the beginning, God drew order out of chaos, setting the sun and moon gently in the sky, distinguishing the dry land from the sea, putting our first parents in a peaceful garden.

Jesus predicts the reversal of all of this: the sun and moon will be shaken; the earth will rock and the waves overwhelm the dry land; political order will collapse. But then, in the midst of this chaos, “they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” Well, what in the world do we make of this, and why does the Church offer it to us on the first day of the ecclesial new year?

Let’s attend first to the imagery of collapse. We hear of cosmic catastrophe—literally a disaster (*dis-astro*, “the falling of the stars”). A sad but undeniable fact of our experience is that nothing lasts. The gorgeous sunset endures for a few minutes, and then it is dark; the sea is placid and calm, but soon it is roiled by great winds; plants grow up, and then they wither and fade; animals in great numbers roam the earth and impress us with their power and beauty, but in a matter of a few years, they fade away. And of course, we, too, come and go. The Psalmist reminds us that our lives are over “like a sigh” (Ps. 90:9).

More to it, we know something about the cosmos as a whole that our ancient brothers and sisters did not—namely, that it,

too, is subject to collapse. Aristotle and Plato thought that nature and matter had always existed and would always exist; we know that they came into being at the Big Bang, and scientists argue that it will go out of being at the Big Crunch—or just wear out, growing colder and colder. Everything in the cosmos passes—indeed, even the cosmos itself.

Next, we hear about political chaos: nations will be in tumult. One is tempted to say, “What else is new?” Even the most casual survey of history shows that nations have always been in tumult. Politics has always been a blood sport. Peace is usually just a brief pause between battles, a chance for the two sides to take a breath. Even the Pax Romana of Augustus was bought at a terrible price and lasted only a short time. Much the same can be said of the Pax Americana. Political order comes and goes and is marked at every turn by violence and instability. Wherever human beings are, there will be conflict; this is true at the level of families, corporations, and society.

Some interpret this apocalyptic language as evocative of death, the time when, for all of us, the stars and moon and everything else comes crashing down. We all know in our bones that no matter how much we seek to keep it at bay, death comes to us. For every one of us, at the moment of death, the whole world collapses.

So, do we just fall into depression? No! We realize again the liberating truth that nothing here below lasts; our bodies, politics, nature, the cosmos itself—everything passes. Therefore,



don't expect to find your ultimate fulfillment in any of it! Look elsewhere. Look higher.

Now attend to the Gospel once more: "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Jesus is hearkening back to the great prophecy in the seventh chapter of the prophet Daniel. The prophet speaks there of "one like a son of man" who will come on "clouds of heaven" and deliver Israel after a long period of oppression (Dan. 7:13).

This is precisely how the first Christians appreciated Jesus. He was not just one more prophet or teacher. He was the very Incarnation of God's eternal wisdom, God's love, God's way of being. And this meant that he was their link to that eternal power that runs through all things, suffuses all things, transcends all things; that power that endures even when the plants and planets and the cosmos itself fade away; that power that lasts even after our bodies have come and gone.

There is a great tension within Christian thought between the yes and the no. In one sense, there is a great yes to the world, because God made it and made it good. Human beings, political institutions, the world, and the cosmos in its entirety—all of it is good. But here is the no: they are not the ultimate good, precisely because they fade away.

The whole point of this apocalyptic discourse is not to frighten us, but rather to give us hope and to tell us where to look. Don't keep your eyes fixed on the always chaotic and always passing world, on the always unreliable realm of politics,

THE FIRST WEEK *of* ADVENT

on the fleeting bodily life that we live. Keep your eyes fixed on the Son of Man, who links you to the very power of God.

Watch for him, wait for him, and find your peace in him.

# GETTING THE HOUSE IN ORDER

Isaiah 2:1–5 (Year A)

This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come,  
The mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be established as the highest mountain  
and raised above the hills.  
All nations shall stream toward it;  
many peoples shall come and say:  
"Come, let us climb the LORD's mountain,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
That he may instruct us in his ways,  
and we may walk in his paths."  
For from Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations,  
and impose terms on many peoples.  
They shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
One nation shall not raise the sword against another,  
nor shall they train for war again.  
O house of Jacob, come,  
let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Christian life has a permanent Advent quality, for we are always expecting the coming of the Lord. There is always a longing, a vigil-keeping that is essential to being a Christian. “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

He came in history, and he will definitively come at the end of time. But he is also coming even now, for the Lord wants to take up residence in us today. Remember how the Lord said to Zacchaeus, “Today I must stay at your house” (Luke 19:5). So Advent is, perhaps most immediately, a preparation for that coming: we are getting ourselves ready to receive the Christ who wants to be born in us.

How do we do this? This passage, taken from the second chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah, gives us some wonderful instruction. The prophet speaks of the day of fulfillment, the day when the Lord will definitively rule over Israel. Can you see how this is a veiled anticipation of what we will look like when Christ comes to rule over us?

The first thing we hear is this: “In days to come, / the mountain of the LORD’s house / shall be established as the highest mountain.” This couldn’t be simpler—or more challenging. When Christ comes to reign in us, he is the highest value. Period. His house is on the highest mountain. Period. Be honest, something or someone or some value is highest in your life: your career, your wealth, your prestige, your family, your country, your own ego—whatever it might be, everyone has a highest mountain. When Christ comes, he insists on being

Lord of your life, with no competition.

And then Isaiah tells us, “All nations shall stream toward it; / many peoples shall come and say: / ‘Come, let us climb the LORD’s mountain, / to the house of the God of Jacob.” Let that beautiful image stay in your mind all throughout the Advent season. The streaming of all the nations of the world toward Jerusalem and the temple is evocative of all the elements of *you* streaming toward Christ: your emotions, your mind, your will, your personal projects and plans, your friendships, your entertainments, your hobbies—everything. It all belongs to him, and he demands to be the Lord of your life. All of us sinners of a religious bent tend to say that Jesus is very important to us; however, if we are honest, he is one interest among many. But Christ is not coming to be one minor interest among others. He will not be sequestered to Sunday alone. He must be the highest value, and everything else in your life must be subordinated to him.

Can I honestly say that every single dimension of my life is under Jesus’ lordship? And it doesn’t do us one bit of good to play games; we have to be honest with ourselves. If I were to identify a mountain that competes with him, what would it be? A wonderful Advent preparation is just this ordering or reordering of your life. Do what the twelve-step advocates call a searching moral inventory. Go through every aspect of your life that I just mentioned, and ask whether all of them are under Jesus’ lordship.

Now, as we continue our reading of Isaiah, here is the good news: “He shall judge between the nations, / and impose terms on many peoples. / They shall beat their swords into plowshares / and their spears into pruning hooks; / one nation shall not raise the sword against another.” We are on mysterious ground here, and the prophet is articulating a very important spiritual principle. All of us sinners are at war with ourselves. When Christ is not the center of our lives, we become a jumble of conflicting desires and aspirations. Our public life wants to go this way, but our private life pulls against it. One friendship pulls me here, but another one pushes me there. I have one ideal that brings me this way, but the more realistic side of me goes the other way. My mind seeks this, but my will seeks that. This is the cacophony of the divided self.

But when Christ is the center—when his holy mountain is indisputably the highest—then all of the elements that make us up find harmony, since they are all subordinated to the same end. This friendship will not militate against that one, since both are in service of Christ; my mind will not be at odds with my will, since both are subordinated to the Word; my private life will not conflict with my public life, for both have surrendered their prerogatives to the Lord. The swords will be beaten into plowshares; thus, the weapons of conflict in us now become the means of cultivation. In short, peace will break out in us.

When should all of this happen? *Now!* Listen to Paul as he speaks to the little Christian Church gathered in Rome:

“You know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep” (Rom. 13:11). In the Bible, sleep is never a good thing; it symbolizes spiritual laziness or inattention. Think, for example, of the disciples sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane. When should we prepare for the coming of Christ? Now! When should we get our spiritual houses in order? Now! When should we knock down mountains that are higher than the Lord’s mountain? Now!

How beautifully the Gospel of Matthew picks up on this motif: “Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come” (Matt. 24:42). Every year, we all dawdle, fall asleep, lapse into spiritual inattention. And every year, when Advent rolls around, the Church shouts at us once more: Wake up! Change! Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord!

# INCOMING!

Matthew 24:37–44 (Year A)

Jesus said to his disciples: “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. In those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark. They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be also at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.”

Advent (*adventus*) means “coming” or “arrival.” Arrivals can be wonderful, joyous, deeply fulfilling—and arrivals can scare the life out of us. Jacques Derrida characterized his famously complex



philosophy of deconstructionism as *Viens, oui, oui*, “Come, yes, yes”: an openness to the new, the different, the surprising, the incoming. But that last word is telling, isn’t it? Soldiers shout “incoming” when missiles and bombs are arriving. Advents can be scary things, for something breaks in to end, upset, or rearrange the current state of affairs.

Listen to the words of the Gospel of Matthew: “Jesus said to his disciples, ‘As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.’” These are not very reassuring words. Then he specifies: people were eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, right up to the time of the flood, and then, when it came, with shocking suddenness, they were destroyed.

Our version of Noah’s world-destroying flood would be like the crashing of a huge comet into the earth. Scientists tell us that this would destroy civilization and life as we know it. The end of an old world had arrived, but the inhabitants of that world were clueless. A new world was coming, but the prospective citizens of it had no idea how to prepare for it. What if we knew that a comet was coming but did nothing about it? This was the situation of those in Noah’s time and, Jesus suggests, those in his own time.

What is so frightening about the coming of the Son of Man? Why isn’t it just good news? If he is the life, then life that is opposed to him has to give way; if he is the truth, then false claimants to truth must cede to him; and if he is the way,

then the false ways have to be abandoned. And all of this will hurt. If he is the Son of God, then he will break into our sinful world like a cleansing fire, a wild storm, or a violent revolution.

What will this look like? To find out, we turn once more to the prophet Isaiah: “In days to come, / the mountain of the LORD’s house / shall be established as the highest mountain / and raised above the hills.” The mountain of the Lord’s house is Mt. Zion, the place of the temple. In the age of the Messiah, the worship of the living God will be the center and summit of life, the good above any and all goods. From adoration, right order flows. When we worship the true God, we become interiorly and exteriorly ordered. This sounds wonderful, but how will it play in a society in which the vast majority of people have stopped worshiping God—70 percent in the American Catholic Church alone? How will it play out in a world in which sex, pleasure, money, power, and honor are regularly worshiped?

Next we hear that “all nations shall stream toward it; / many peoples shall come and say: / ‘Come, let us climb the LORD’s mountain / . . . that he may instruct us in his ways.’” In our dysfunction, we like to set up boundaries, divisions, separations. We like to keep our people in and everybody else out. How happy would we be with all nations streaming together to one place? But this is precisely what God wants. More to it, on this mountain, we are all going to take instruction from God. Tell that to the society predicated upon self-assertion and self-

esteem, going its own way on its own terms. To say that Jesus is coming is to say that the Lord is coming. How popular will that bit of information be?

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares / and their spears into pruning hooks.” This sounds like paradise, but here is a terrible and sobering truth: there would not be so many wars unless—deep down, at some strange, distorted level—we liked them. Think of wars on the grand international level, or think of wars in families and societies. In the distortion caused by sin, we like them. But Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, resist not evil, bless those who curse you, pray for those who maltreat you.

This is what the coming of Christ the Lord means. It is good news, but in our sin, it's also a time of threat because it means the end of our old world. This is why it involves a complete rethinking and reworking of our lives.

Advent is here; Christ is coming. Are you ready?